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AUTHOR	Hess, Frederick M.
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ABSTRACT

This report draws on the results of an extensive study to illuminate the nature of school boards and the challenges they face. Data were gathered from a survey of board members in 2,000 school districts. The response rate was 41 percent. Following are some of the more notable findings from the study. Boards in large districts (more than 25,000 students) are fundamentally different from boards in smaller districts: Briefly, large-district boards tend to be more political than small-district boards. Questions of funding and student achievement are leading topics of local concern. To address school discipline and safety, a majority of districts use locker searches and dress codes. Respondents reported spending about 25 hours per month on board business. Two-thirds of respondents reported receiving no salary for their board service. School boards are somewhat less racially diverse than the nation as a whole. Overall, 61.1 percent of board members are male. School board members have higher incomes and are better educated than the typical American. In general, board elections are relatively apolitical affairs, with few elections deemed "very competitive." The mean length of board service among respondents is 6.7 years. (Contains 46 tables.) (WFA)

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School Boards at the Dawn of the 21st Century

Conditions and Challenges of District Governance

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A report prepared for the
National School Boards Association

by

Frederick M. Hess
School of Education and
Department of Government
University of Virginia

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Executive Summary

Lay governance of public education is a uniquely American institution, with roots in the locally controlled schools of the New England colonies and in the common school movement of the mid-19th century. But despite the long history of school boards-and despite the important responsibility they bear for governing the education of our nation's children-little statistical information has been available on these public bodies.

This report draws on the results of an extensive study to illuminate the nature of school boards and the challenges they face. A survey of board members in 2,000 school districts yielded a robust response rate of 41 percent, providing an exceptionally clear and penetrating look into the groups of men and women who govern the nation's 14,890 school systems.

The most striking conclusion from these findings is that large-district boards are fundamentally different from their smaller, more plentiful, counterparts. In large districts (defined as those with 25,000 or more students), school boards are relatively political bodies, with more costly campaigns, more attentive interest groups, more politically oriented candidates, and more hotly contested elections. Boards in small districts, on the other hand, tend to be relatively apolitical bodies that attract little attention and feature inexpensive, often uncontested campaigns.

Some similarities between boards in smaller and larger districts are worth noting, however. No matter what kind of district they serve, today's board members put a high priority on student achievement. Board members nationwide also contribute considerable time to school leadership, and two-thirds of them receive no pay for their work.

Such similarities aside, the concerns that predominate in large, urban districts-including school violence and teacher shortages-are less prevalent in smaller districts but are often portrayed nevertheless as national crises. This phenomenon poses a challenge for policy makers, as it appears that the public image of school boards and school systems is informed largely by the conditions that prevail in the scant 2 percent of districts that enroll 25,000 or more students. Fully grasping the nature of governance in those districts, and how those lessons may or may not apply to the other 98 percent of school districts, is central to any effort to reform school systems.

Key Findings

A few of the more notable results of this study are briefly highlighted here:

School Boards and Policy Issues

- Respondents universally report that questions of funding and student achievement are leading topics of local concern. Emphasis on student achievement, in particular, has increased significantly during the 1990s. In addition, over 85 percent describe special education, teacher quality, and improving educational technology as a "significant" or "moderate" concern.

- Overall, school violence ranks surprisingly low among board member concerns. A closer look at school violence reveals just one respondent in nine calls school violence a "major" concern, with half of respondents deeming it a "mild" concern or "not a concern." Even in large districts, barely one-fourth of board members think violence is a major concern, though two-thirds think it is a moderate or major concern.

- To address school discipline and safety, a majority of respondents report that their districts now use locker searches and dress codes. While significant media attention has followed the use of metal detectors in recent years, respondents report their use in just 10 percent of districts.

- More than half of respondents report that their district provides alternative schools or arrangements for home schooling; slightly more than a third say the district offers parents a choice among district schools; and about one-fourth say the district allows families to also choose public schools in other districts. One in six respondents indicates that their district offers magnet schools, about the same number that offer charter schooling.

- Alternative certification programs for teachers are rare and generally small. About one-fourth of respondents report their districts use a formal system of alternative teacher licensure, and of this number, the majority hire no more than five percent of their teachers through such programs. Of the three-quarters of districts currently without a formal program of alternative licensure, more than 70 percent report that the idea has not been discussed.

- Just under 15 percent of respondents indicate their district has a system of merit pay for teachers, but more than 48 percent of those in districts without merit pay report the idea is under consideration.

Board Service and Preparation

- Respondents report spending about 25 hours per month on board business. Substantial numbers of board members, however-especially those in large districts-spend 20 or more hours a week on board affairs.

- A vast majority of respondents have received training in most areas of board operations — especially board member roles. Approximately one in five board members would like to receive training in the following substantive or strategic areas: student achievement issues, planning and budget/resource allocation, community collaborations/partnerships, and community engagement.

- Two-thirds of respondents report receiving no salary for their board service and less than 4 percent report earning $10,000 a year or more. In districts with 25,000 or more students, however, more than one in five respondents receives a salary of $10,000 or more a year. As noted above, substantial numbers of large district board members devote considerable time to board affairs. This fact puts their compensation for service into greater perspective.

- Respondents say the three most critical factors in evaluating superintendent performance are the board-superintendent relationship, the morale of school system employees, and the safety of district students. The emphasis placed on the board-superintendent relationship reflects the importance of a well-functioning leadership team to effective governance and administration.

- Two-thirds of superintendents are hired from outside the district, a finding that may have implications for leadership development within school systems.

A Profile of School Boards

- School boards are somewhat less racially diverse than is the nation as a whole, but are more ethnically diverse than most state and national elective bodies. Overall, the boards in the sample are 85.5 percent white, 7.8 percent African-American, and 3.8 percent Hispanic. In large districts, which tend to be more urban and more racially heterogeneous, the figures are 78.9 percent white, 13.0 percent African-American, and 7.5 percent Hispanic.

- Overall, respondents report that their boards are 61.1 percent male and 38.9 percent female, with small-districts boards more heavily male than boards in large districts
- Board members have higher incomes and are better-educated than the typical American. This is especially true in large districts. Nearly half of respondents list that their occupational background is business or professional, while relatively few indicate a professional background in education.
- Most school boards are composed of between five and eight members; less than 20 percent of respondents serve on boards with nine or more members.
- Nearly two-thirds of respondents serve a four-year term; less than 10 percent serve longer terms.

Board Elections

- Despite high-profile efforts to increase the number of appointed school boards (especially in large, urban districts), respondents indicate 96.2 percent of the membership on their board is elected and more than 93 percent of boards are entirely elected. The majority of these members are selected in at-large elections.
- In general, board elections are relatively apolitical affairs, with little money spent on most elections, few incumbents unseated, and few board contests deemed "very competitive" by board members. However, elections in large districts are substantially more likely to be costly, competitive, and attended to by local interest groups than are those in smaller districts.
- While the vast majority of school board elections cost the candidate less than $1,000, roughly 40 percent of elections in large districts cost $5,000 or more. Respondents also indicate most board campaigns are self-funded or are supported by contributions from friends and family, but large-district board members also frequently raise substantial sums from teacher unions and the business community.
- School board election turnout is substantially higher when board elections are held at the same time as elections for state, federal, or general municipal offices.
- Respondents generally report their political views as being moderate or conservative, with fewer than one in five labeling themselves liberal. Even in large districts, which are generally regarded as liberal strongholds, a majority of respondents identify themselves as moderate and more respondents term themselves conservative than liberal.
- The mean length of board service among respondents is 6.7 years. A significant number of board members serve long enough (6 years or more) to become familiar with the issues and lend continuity to the board. This pattern holds across districts of all sizes.

Introduction

For more than two centuries, school boards have been charged with governing the education of our nation's children. Despite the magnitude of this responsibility, popular understanding of school boards and their work generally rests on anecdotes and news stories. Our lack of knowledge leaves us ill-equipped to appreciate or address the challenges school boards face. Given the increasing attention to education governance and leadership, it is surprising that we do not know more about the bodies that govern the nation's 14,890 school systems.

Because school boards are charged with providing effective community oversight of school systems, questions arise about their structure, their current and future roles and responsibilities, and what changes might enhance the contribution they can make. While such questions have no simple answers, a fuller understanding of school boards is a first step to addressing these questions.

The greatest challenge confronting school boards is to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn. Boards must provide that opportunity while meeting the needs of the communities they serve and taking care not to micromanage or to invade the appropriate realm of professional educators. Part of this balancing act is the implicit desire that boards be representative and democratic without being overtly political. To understand how well school boards are able to manage these compromises, and to understand whether they are equipped to manage the demands placed on them, it is imperative that we know more about the boards themselves. How are board members selected for office? How long do they serve? How competitive are board elections? What kinds of people serve on school boards? How demanding is school board service? How prepared are board members to address the challenges they face? These questions, and related ones, will be addressed here.

Most education research focuses on conditions and policies in the states and in the largest urban systems. The result is that we have a limited understanding of how educational challenges or standing policies vary across local districts in a number of critical areas. This can make it difficult to understand or address the real challenges that confront local districts. We are hampered by a lack of localized knowledge in a number of such areas, including school choice, teacher certification, graduation testing requirements, and school safety.

To that end, in spring 2001, the National School Boards Association conducted an extensive survey of a nationally representative sample of U.S. school boards. Board members in 2,000 districts were contacted by mail, with respondents in approximately 41 percent of targeted districts completing an eight-page survey. This report presents the results of that study, in order to provide concrete information on the state of the nation's school boards and on the local conditions in a number of pressing policy areas.

Methodology

The survey that forms the basis for this report was developed in consultation with the National School Boards Association (NSBA) and school board authorities.

The sampled board members were identified in a two-stage process. First, a stratified random sample of school districts was constructed. In this process, larger districts were oversampled, while the nation's more numerous small districts were sampled at a lower rate. This approach helped ensure that large districts would provide enough responses to permit meaningful analysis. Consequently, while 2 percent of the nation's school districts enroll more than 25,000 students, 11.9 percent of the sampled districts do. While 85 percent of all districts enroll fewer than 5,000 students, 51.9 percent of the sampled districts do. For each sampled district, one board member was randomly selected from the current school board.

Targeted respondents were mailed an eight-page survey in spring 2001. Those who did not respond were contacted up to two additional times. Respondents were assured that they would remain

anonymous. The sample included nearly one-seventh of the nation's districts and provided a proximate cross-section of the nation's school systems. In the end, 827 respondents returned the survey, yielding a 41 percent response rate. This response rate was somewhat higher than what would normally be anticipated for a mail survey of this kind.[1] The high yield can likely be attributed in large part to the use of follow-up mailings directed at targeted respondents.[2]

Response rates were relatively stable across districts of different sizes (see Table 1). Board members from the 237 sample districts with 25,000 or more students responded at a 41.8 percent rate, those from the 725 districts with 5,000-24,999 students at a 43.2 percent rate, and those from the 1,038 districts with fewer than 5,000 students at a 38.4 percent rate.

Table 1: Response Rates by District Size

District Enrollment	Number of Districts in Sample	Number of Respondents	Response Rate
25,000+	237	99	41.8 percent
5,000-24,999	725	313	43.2 percent
Less than 5,000	1,038	399	38.4 percent
Overall	2,000	827	41.4 percent

The total number of respondents is slightly higher than the total of the first three rows. This is due to the inclusion of cases in which the district enrollment could not be ascertained.

This report presents most results by district size, making it possible to distinguish between those conditions common to all school boards and those that characterize boards operating in smaller or larger districts. When results are broken down by district size, they are reported in three categories: districts of 25,000 or more students, those of 5,000 to 24,999, and those with fewer than 5,000.

This breakdown is especially useful because district size is closely correlated to the community's social profile. In large districts, more than 50 percent of respondents identified their district as "inner city" or "urban," and another 43 percent identified it as "suburban."[3] Medium-sized districts were deemed suburban over 52 percent of the time, and as "urban" in another 25 percent. Districts with less

1. For a detailed consideration of this question, see Don A. Dillman, James A. Christenson, Edwin H. Carpenter, and Ralph M. Brooks. "Increasing Mail Questionnaire Response: A Four-State Comparison." American Sociological Review 39 (5): 744-756. See also Richard J. Fox, Melvin R. Crask, and Jonghoon Kim. 1988. "Mail Survey Response Rate: A Meta-Analysis of Selected Techniques for Inducing Response." Public Opinion Quarterly 52 (4): 467-491. See also, Maria Krysan, Howard Schuman, Lesli Jo Scott, and Paul Beatty. 1994. "Response Rates and Response Content in Mail Versus Face-to-Face Surveys." Public Opinion Quarterly 58 (3): 381-399

2. For discussion, see Jeannine M. James and Richard Bolstein. 1990. "The Effect of Monetary Incentives and Follow-Up Mailings on the Response Rate and Response Quality in Mail Surveys." Public Opinion Quarterly 54 (3): 346-361. See also, Francis J. Yammarino, Steven J. Skinner, and Terry L. Childers. 1991. "Understanding Mail Survey Response Behavior: A Meta-Analysis. Public Opinion Quarterly 55 (4): 613-639.

3. The accompanying table provides data on the relationship between district size and the relative urbanity ascribed to the district by the local respondent.

Table A: District Size and Social Profile

	25,000+	5,000-24,999	Less than 5,000	All Districts
Inner city	12.3 percent	4.0 percent	2.9 percent	4.3 percent
Urban	38.3 percent	25.1 percent	6.0 percent	16.9 percent
Suburban	43.2 percent	52.5 percent	27.3 percent	38.9 percent
Rural	6.2 percent	18.4 percent	63.8 percent	39.9 percent
Total districts	81	299	384	764

than 5,000 students were identified as "rural" more than 60 percent of the time, and as urban or inner city less than 9 percent. Simply put, large districts are generally urban, medium districts suburban, and small districts rural.

Findings

The results are reported in four sections. The first considers several key policy concerns that are being discussed and debated at national, state, and local levels; the second explores board service and preparation to address policy issues and govern wisely; the third provides a profile of board members, highlighting critical board member characteristics and board structures; and the fourth focuses on elections, examining the nature of the political process that governs school boards.

I. School Boards and Policy Issues

One of the difficulties in discussing education policy is the limited scope of available data on how school districts-at the board and administrative level-address policy. While copious data are available on state-level activity in this area, little systematic information is available on policy at the district level or on how boards understand or address policy challenges. Drawing on board member observations, this section provides a snapshot of local concerns and activity. After examining the concerns that board members rate most pressing, with special attention to student achievement, this section addresses district activity on five issues: youth violence and school safety, school choice, site-based management, student accountability mechanisms, and teacher licensure. It also takes a look at some of the ways boards engage their communities in decision making processes.

Issues of Local Concern

What issues do local board members view as most pressing? Respondents universally report that questions of funding and student achievement are topics of "significant" or "moderate" local concern (see Table 2). As is pointed out below, board member emphasis on student achievement, in particular, appears to have grown significantly during the 1990s.

Although media coverage of schools tends to focus on student discipline, drug and alcohol use, teacher shortages, and overcrowded schools, these issues rank near the bottom of respondents' concerns. Instead, board members identify a different array of priorities. Eighty-eight percent have "significant" or "moderate" concerns about special education, an issue that raises thorny ethical and legal questions and, perhaps as a consequence, receives relatively limited attention in legislatures or the popular press. More than 80 percent of respondents are concerned about education technology, and a similar number are concerned about the quality of their district's teachers. At the bottom of board members' current concerns are student discipline, teacher shortages, and school overcrowding.

What explains the divergence between the issues that dominate popular discussions of schooling and the actual concerns voiced by respondents? In part, it may be due to the fact that some issues lend themselves more readily to popular attention than do others. However, it is also clear that the issues that receive popular attention are primarily of concern in large districts (see Table 2). For instance, in large districts, teacher shortages are ranked the number three problem, student discipline and substance use are ranked as concerns more than 80 percent of the time, and school overcrowding is an issue for more than 75 percent of respondents. On the other hand, in small districts, teacher shortages are the next-to-last concern, student discipline and substance use are deemed much less problematic, and overcrowding is reported to be a concern less than half of the time.

Broadly speaking, board members in medium and large districts have more concerns than their small-district counterparts. The most notable exceptions come in the areas of funding and student achievement, where concern is universal.

Table 2: Leading Board Member Concerns

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Budget/funding	100.0 percent	98.7 percent	96.0 percent	97.6 percent
Student achievement	98.9 percent	98.0 percent	96.4 percent	97.2 percent
Special education	93.3 percent	93.4 percent	85.2 percent	88.1 percent
Improving educational technology	84.3 percent	90.7 percent	85.9 percent	87.5 percent
Teacher quality	91.2 percent	88.2 percent	84.9 percent	86.8 percent
Parental support/interest	88.9 percent	81.0 percent	77.3 percent	79.8 percent
Regulation	79.3 percent	76.6 percent	75.6 percent	76.7 percent
Drug/alcohol use	82.2 percent	81.3 percent	69.4 percent	75.4 percent
Discipline	81.3 percent	78.4 percent	68.8 percent	73.7 percent
Teacher shortages	95.6 percent	76.9 percent	65.3 percent	73.2 percent
Overcrowded schools	76.9 percent	71.0 percent	46.3 percent	59.5 percent
Total districts	94	313	399	806

Percent terming issue one of "significant" or "moderate" concern.

A Growing Emphasis on Student Achievement

Consistent with the findings discussed above, the vast majority of respondents report that the percentage of board time spent on issues directly related to student achievement has increased during their board tenure (see Table 3). Seventy-three percent of respondents say attention to achievement has increased during their tenure, while just 3 percent say it has decreased. This is consistent with a reported shift in the focus of boards during the 1990s, when boards consciously sought to make student achievement their central concern.[4]

Table 3: Board Time Spent on Student Achievement Issues During Member's Tenure

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Increased	74.7 percent	80.8 percent	66.8 percent	73.0 percent
Decreased	6.0 percent	1.7 percent	3.5 percent	3.1 percent
Did not change	18.1 percent	16.6 percent	25.5 percent	21.3 percent
Don't know	1.2 percent	1.0 percent	4.0 percent	2.5 percent
Total districts	302	376	771	795

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

4. For documentation of the growing emphasis that school boards placed on student achievement in the 1990s, see Table 4.1 in Frederick M. Wirt and Michael W. Kirst. 2001. The Political Dynamics of American Education, Second Edition. Richmond, CA: McCutcheon Publishing (p. 100).

School Violence and School Safety

Public concern over school violence is stoked by newspaper headlines, extensive media coverage, and promises of action by policy makers and educators. How much of a concern is school violence to the officials who actually govern school systems? Surprisingly, respondents are significantly less concerned about school violence than one might expect, with the concern disproportionately located in large districts (see Table 4). Overall, just one board member in nine labeled school violence a "major" concern. In half of the responding districts, school violence was deemed a "mild" concern or "not a concern."

Even in large districts, barely one-fourth of board members thought violence a major concern, though two-thirds thought it a moderate or major concern. In small districts, just 7.3 percent of board members thought violence a major concern, and barely a third thought it a moderate or major concern. Violence was deemed "not a concern" in only 2.2 percent of large districts but nearly one-fifth of small districts. Again, popular perceptions of education problems tend to reflect conditions in large districts than those in the nation's more numerous small districts.

Table 4: How Much of a Concern Is School Violence?

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Major	26.4 percent	12.8 percent	7.3 percent	11.7 percent
Moderate	42.9 percent	48.5 percent	29.9 percent	38.7 percent
Mild	27.5 percent	34.4 percent	43.6 percent	38.2 percent
Not a concern	2.2 percent	3.9 percent	19.2 percent	11.3 percent
Do not know	1.1 percent	0.3 percent	0 percent	0.1 percent
Total districts	91	305	385	781

Given the tempered view of school violence expressed by most respondents, what steps are their districts taking to prevent violence? A majority of respondents report using locker searches and dress codes, but the most common safety measures-used in more than two-thirds of the districts-are student expulsion and the presence of local law enforcement officers (see Table 5). Over 40 percent of districts use drug-detecting dogs, and more than a quarter use closed-circuit TV monitoring. However, while significant media attention has followed the use of metal detectors in recent years, they are used in just 10 percent of districts.

Large districts, where board members are particularly concerned about school violence, are particularly likely to use various safety measures. More than 60 percent of large districts employ locker searches, dress codes, and security personnel, while smaller districts are far less likely to use such measures. Two in five large districts use closed-circuit TV, and nearly a third use metal detectors. Meanwhile, less than 25 percent of small districts use closed-circuit TV, and just 5 percent use metal detectors. Overall, large districts are more likely to adopt almost every safety measure, especially the more costly or intrusive measures.

Table 5: District Use of Safety and Disciplinary Measures

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Expulsions	87.9 percent	86.6 percent	74.2 percent	80.8 percent
Local law enforcement officers	85.7 percent	81.4 percent	58.1 percent	70.3 percent
Locker searches	64.8 percent	52.9 percent	58.1 percent	57.1 percent
Dress codes	71.4 percent	53.9 percent	47.0 percent	52.6 percent
Security personnel	65.9 percent	62.1 percent	26.9 percent	45.2 percent
Closed campus during lunchtime	46.2 percent	42.2 percent	42.1 percent	42.5 percent
Drug-detecting dogs	39.6 percent	40.5 percent	42.9 percent	42.0 percent
Closed-circuit TV	42.9 percent	32.0 percent	24.8 percent	29.4 percent
Metal detectors	29.7 percent	11.1 percent	4.9 percent	10.1 percent
Total districts	91	306	387	795

Percentage of districts that use each safety or disciplinary measure.
Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

School Choice and Educational Alternatives

Among the most hotly discussed education reform issues today are school choice and the provision of educational alternatives. Most such discussion focuses on a handful of experimental voucher programs and on state-level charter school activity. What does the world of school choice look like from the local vantage point? Are charter schools as widespread as the public attention might suggest? What kinds of choices and alternatives are most common across the nation's districts?

Alternative education options are widespread, though charter schooling-for all the attention it has attracted-is still one of the less widely available approaches. More than half of respondents report that their districts provide alternative schools and arrangements for home schooling (see Table 6). Slightly more than a third offer parents a choice among schools within the district, and about one-fourth allow families to choose public schools in other districts. Finally, one district in six offers magnet schools, nearly as many provide charter schools, and one in 20 provides contract schools. Despite the attention devoted to charter schooling, inter-district public school choice, magnet schooling, and contract schools, none of these is reported available by even 35 percent of respondents.

As might be expected, large districts and small differ sharply in the range of alternatives they provide to families. More than 60 percent of large districts offer alternative schools and public school choice within the district, and roughly half provide magnet schools or charter schools. Meanwhile, fewer than 40 percent of small districts provide alternative schools, less than a third offer public school choice, and fewer than 10 percent have charter or magnet schools. More than 20 percent of small districts provide no choice options; the same is true in just 1 percent of large districts.

When districts do offer charter schools, popular accounts tend to focus on those locales-such as Philadelphia, Houston, or Washington D.C.-where large numbers of charters have been launched. However, the respondents make clear just how atypical these districts are. Of the respondents who indicate that their district has authorized charter schools (n=115), nearly 60 percent say the district has authorized only one such school, and more than 80 percent report that no more than four schools have been authorized. In the 84 percent of districts that do not offer charter schooling (n=674), respondents report that in most cases, the board has not even begun to discuss the possibility of charter schooling.

While educational alternatives have proliferated in larger, more urban districts, such options remain uncommon in the nation's many smaller, more rural districts. This is not unexpected, since it is unlikely districts with smaller enrollments and fewer schools would have the need or the resources to support a magnet or alternative school. Choice of a public school within a small district may not make economic or common sense in a district with few schools or few disparities in the quality of its schools. However, it is interesting to note the degree to which home schooling in now an option in large (66 percent), medium (49 percent), and small districts (54 percent).

TABLE 6: AVAILABILITY OF SCHOOL CHOICE OPTIONS

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Home schooling	65.6 percent	49.2 percent	54.1 percent	53.7 percent
Alternative schools	78.5 percent	59.1 percent	39.7 percent	51.6 percent
Choice of public schools within district	62.4 percent	48.2 percent	19.7 percent	35.9 percent
Choice of public schools outside district	25.8 percent	18.5 percent	29.8 percent	25.3 percent
Magnet schools	55.9 percent	22.1 percent	3.1 percent	16.7 percent
Charter schools	48.4 percent	16.2 percent	8.3 percent	16.0 percent
No choice options	1.1 percent	13.2 percent	21.2 percent	15.5 percent
Contracted schools	14.0 percent	4.3 percent	2.6 percent	4.8 percent
Total districts	93	303	388	794

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

SITE-BASED MANAGEMENT

Site-based management (SBM) has been a favored education reform for more than a decade. While Chicago's famous experiment with ambitious SBM-centered reform ended in the mid-1990s, and while the evidence on the effectiveness of SBM remains mixed, the approach still draws significant support from professional educators. How prevalent is SBM in the nation's school systems?[5] Overall, 40 percent of respondents report that their district requires schools to have school-based management committees, and another one-fifth report that their district formally encourages schools to do so (see Table 7). Again, there is a large disparity between large and small districts in this area, with two-thirds of large districts requiring SBM committees, compared with only one-quarter of small districts. All but 13 percent of large districts have a formal SBM policy, but 44 percent of small districts have no such policy. Much of the disparity may be due to the presence of less formal forms of parental and staff involvement in small districts.[6]

5. For an examination of the factors that help shape district decisions regarding SBM policy, see Frederick M. Hess, 1999, "A Political Explanation of Policy Selection: The Case of Urban School Reform," Policy Studies Journal, v27, n3: 459-473.

6. A critical analysis of site-based management is the focus of Darrel W. Drury, Reinventing School-Based Management: A School Board Guide to School-Based Improvement. Alexandria, Va.: National School Boards Association, 1999.

Table 7: District Policy on School Shared Decision Making/ School-Based Management Committees

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Required	68.5 percent	49.3 percent	26.7 percent	40.0 percent
Formally encouraged but not required	16.3 percent	19.0 percent	18.5 percent	18.4 percent
No formal policy	13.0 percent	27.1 percent	44.0 percent	34.0 percent
Don't know	2.2 percent	4.6 percent	10.8 percent	7.5 percent
Total districts	92	306	389	797

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Testing Requirements

Proposals to enhance accountability and student testing have attracted broad support from across the political spectrum. Dozens of states have either adopted high-stakes testing regimes that require students to pass required exams before receiving a diploma, and the recently re-authorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act includes a national accountability program. The popular conversation around testing and accountability focuses on the state capitals and Washington, though its effects will be felt in the nation's 15,000 local districts. What does the situation look like from the perspective of these districts?

Just over 40 percent of respondents indicate that students in their districts are required to pass a test of some kind in order to graduate high school (see Table 8). A bare majority of districts require no test, at any point, for grade promotion or graduation. Large districts are far more likely to require a graduation test than are small districts: Nearly two-thirds of large districts require a graduation exam, compared with just one-third of small districts. In short, graduation tests have become commonplace in large districts but remain less frequent elsewhere.

Other tests for promotion remain infrequent, and most districts that do not currently require graduation tests are not considering them. Just 17 percent of the 421 districts without graduation tests are formally considering adopting such measures, although that figure rises to 35 percent in the large districts that currently do not require an exam.

Table 8: District Use of High-Stakes Testing

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Test required for promotion at some grade(s) prior to graduation	21.5 percent	19.7 percent	16.0 percent	17.9 percent
Test required for graduation from high school	63.4 percent	46.4 percent	33.5 percent	42.2 percent
No test required for promotion or graduation	35.5 percent	48.0 percent	61.8 percent	53.2 percent
Total districts	93	304	382	789

The percentage of districts in which students are required to pass a mandated exam. The cells add up to more than 100 percent because many districts require tests for both promotion and graduation. Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Teacher Licensure

Questions of teacher licensure and preparation have attracted significant attention in recent years. An array of alternative certification programs, including such well-known examples as Teach for America and Troops to Teachers, have helped raise the profile of alternative certification systems. The publicity that these efforts garner may give the impression that alternative certification has become widespread. In truth, how common are these programs? How many locales are considering adopting such steps? Given the shortage of teachers in large districts, this question is a pressing one for those districts, though it would appear to be less of an issue for small districts, where respondents are less concerned about the shortage of teachers.

Overall, about one-fourth of respondents report that their districts use a formal system of alternative teacher licensure (n=188). Of that one-quarter, the majority hire no more than 5 percent of their teachers through alternative certification, and fewer than one in 10 hire more than 15 percent of their teachers by that route. In short, only about one district in 50 hires 15 percent or more of its teachers via alternative certification.

Of the three-quarters of districts that are currently without a formal program of alternative licensure (n=582), respondents in more than 70 percent report that the idea has not been discussed. Despite persistent teacher shortages, alternative certification programs are rare and generally small.

On a related issue, just under 15 percent of respondents report that their district has a system of merit pay for teachers (n=111). However, whereas few additional districts are considering adopting some form of alternative certification, more than 48 percent of respondents in districts without merit pay report that the idea is under consideration (n=675).

Board-Community Engagement

How frequently, and in what ways, do boards seek community input on issues? Table 9 suggests that most boards review parent/community survey data on district student achievement about once a year. Nearly one-fifth of respondents, however, report that such an evaluation never occurs. Similarly, while the plurality of board members report annual open forums (other than board meetings) dealing with student achievement issues, more than one-quarter indicate that such forums are never held.[7] Regardless of district size, about one-fifth to one-fourth of boards do not seek to garner community input through the channels and on the topics listed in Table 9.

Table 9: Board Efforts to Collect Input on Student Achievement and to Evaluate the Board's Performance

	Twice a Year	Once a Year	Every 2 Years or Less	Never	Do Not Know	Observations
Review parent/ community survey data on student achievement goals	16.4 percent	40.6 percent	16.2 percent	18.5 percent	8.4 percent	764
Hold open forums (other than board meetings) for parents/ community to discuss student achievement goals	16.4 percent	31.6 percent	16.1 percent	26.5 percent	9.4 percent	754

7. Large-district boards reportedly make a somewhat greater effort to obtain community input through the avenues and on the topics listed in Table 9 than do others. Respondents indicate that 67 percent of large-district boards review survey data regarding student achievement at least once a year, while less than 55 percent of small-district boards do so. Similarly, respondents report that 59 percent of large districts hold open forums for feedback regarding student achievement goals at least once a year, while slightly less than 45 percent of small districts do so.

The next table offers some insight as to the areas in which boards make a particular effort to obtain community input. Respondents were asked if they offer formal opportunities for community members to share input. (Channels of engagement were not specified.) The results show that school boards are much more likely to provide opportunities for community input on certain kinds of issues,[8] especially budgeting, curriculum, and superintendent selection (see Table 10). More than 40 percent of boards seek such input when it comes to policy formation and principal selection. However, just one-fourth of boards provide opportunities for formal community input on school closings, and fewer than one in 10 do so in the case of collective bargaining agreements with employees.

Boards in large districts are more likely than those in smaller districts to attempt to engage the community in decisions. The greatest difference is in the controversial area of school closings, where more than 50 percent of large districts seek community input but fewer than 20 percent of small districts do so. This may be because large districts have more options when it comes to handling school closings and because they are more likely to face ethnic and neighborhood tensions. Other disparities exist in the areas of budgeting and policy formation, where large districts are also much more likely to seek formal input. Again, this is presumably due to the increased resources at stake and higher levels of tension in big districts.

It is important not to over-interpret the findings presented in Tables 9 and 10, however. Significant input or evaluation can often be generated through informal channels. While the information in these tables is suggestive, it would be a mistake to presume that it comprehensively measures community engagement.

Table 10: Issues on Which Board Provides Formal Opportunities for Community Input

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Budgeting	77.1 percent	66.6 percent	43.0 percent	56.4 percent
Collective bargaining	12.0 percent	8.8 percent	4.6 percent	7.1 percent
Curriculum review	66.3 percent	67.6 percent	48.4 percent	57.8 percent
Policy formation	61.4 percent	44.9 percent	35.2 percent	42.4 percent
Principal selection	42.2 percent	48.3 percent	37.9 percent	42.7 percent
School closings	51.8 percent	34.1 percent	16.9 percent	27.5 percent
Superintendent selection	60.2 percent	62.2 percent	47.0 percent	54.1 percent
Total districts	83	296	372	761

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Summary

Viewing the world of education policy from a district perspective suggests it is wise not to generalize too broadly from high-profile situations or districts. Concerns that predominate in large, urban districts-such as school violence and teacher shortages-are often portrayed as national crises. But these issues appear to be overshadowed by an array of more diverse challenges in most districts. Similarly, reform proposals such as high-stakes testing, school choice, and alternative certification are much less common in the nation's small districts than in the largest ones.

8. For an in-depth examination of why some local boards may be more likely to provide opportunities for community input, see Frederick M. Hess and David L. Leal, 2001, "The Opportunity to Engage: How Race, Class, and Institutions Structure Access to Educational Deliberation," Educational Policy, v15, n3: 474-490.

Boards make a regular effort to obtain community input on a variety of issues, a tendency that is especially strong in large districts and may be attributed to the greater diversity of their constituencies and complexity of educating a larger and more diverse student population. While boards make a continued effort to collect community input on a variety of fronts, this study offers no way to judge the caliber or value of these efforts. A fair summary is that most boards have created formal opportunities for community members to voice their concerns.

II. Board Service and Preparation

Having considered policy issues, it is now appropriate to consider the governing bodies responsible for crafting and monitoring these policies. How demanding is board service? What other community leadership roles do board members play? How prepared are board members for the tasks and issues they face? What kind of preparation would board members find most helpful? Do boards engage in self- evaluation? How do board members perceive the service of another key member of the leadership team, the superintendent?

Time Spent on School Board Business

Respondents report spending about 25 hours a month on board business, roughly one-third of that time in board meetings. The mean requirement for frequency of board meetings is about 14.8 times per year (n=694), but the typical board actually holds about 22.9 meetings a year (n=761). Table 11 shows the total time-including both board meetings and other board commitments-that respondents spend on the job. About one-third spend more than seven hours a week on board business, and one in 10 spends more than 12 hours, while two-thirds spend less than seven hours a week on board affairs.

These general trends mask significant differences between large and small districts. Especially in the large districts, a substantial number of board members report devoting 20 or more hours a week to board affairs. In small districts, fewer than 20 percent of board members spend as much as seven hours a week on board-related duties, and fewer than 3 percent spend as much as 13 hours per week. On the other hand, in large districts, more than 60 percent of board members spend at least 7 hours a week on board business, and a quarter devote at least 18 hours a week.

For board members in small districts, board service is a part-time commitment, with nearly half of members spending less than three hours per week on board business. In large districts, on the other hand, it is not uncommon for board service to consume three or four hours a day during the workweek, dwarfing the time commitment demanded of many state legislators.

Table 11: Monthly Time Commitment Required by Board-Related Duties

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
0-10 hours	4.9 percent	12.5 percent	44.0 percent	27.3 percent
11-25 hours	29.6 percent	48.4 percent	39.3 percent	41.8 percent
26-50 hours	30.9 percent	26.3 percent	14.2 percent	20.8 percent
51-70 hours	9.9 percent	5.2 percent	1.6 percent	3.9 percent
More than 70 hours	24.7 percent	7.6 percent	0.8 percent	6.1 percent
Total districts	81	289	366	736

Other Community Leadership Roles

Do board members concentrate their civic energies on the school board, or do they also simultaneously serve as civic leaders in other capacities? Respondents report that they typically serve on multiple community boards or committees, with the mean respondent serving on 1.89 such bodies in addition to the school board (n=789). Nearly three-quarters serve on at least one such body, and a third report that they serve on three or more (see Table 12). Board members from large districts are especially likely to also serve on other community boards or committees. Nearly 50 percent of large-district respondents serve on at least three other such bodies. In small districts, just 23 percent do. The mean number of additional memberships is 2.80 for large-district respondents,

2.02 for those in medium-sized districts, and 1.60 for those in small districts. Board members are involved in many local roles; this is especially true of those members serving on boards in the most demanding districts.

Table 12: Other Local Boards/Committees/Task Forces On Which the Respondent Serves

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
0	16.5 percent	27.1 percent	30.6 percent	27.9 percent
1	18.7 percent	18.8 percent	23.6 percent	21.0 percent
2	16.5 percent	21.1 percent	22.1 percent	20.9 percent
3	23.1 percent	13.9 percent	12.2 percent	14.1 percent
More than 3	25.3 percent	19.2 percent	11.6 percent	16.1 percent
Total districts	91	303	385	789

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Board Member Preparation

Given that few board members have a professional background in education, they are likely to lack expertise in many areas their board must address. For this reason, those concerned with school governance have long advocated enhanced board member training and preparation. This study addressed three questions: In which areas do board members actually receive training? Does the extent of training vary with district size? How much additional training, if any, do board members desire?

Board members were asked whether they had received training in 11 specific dimensions of board activity (see Table 13). Generally, half to three-quarters of respondents report having received training in each area. The one area in which respondents report near-universal training is on the subject of "board member roles and responsibilities." The other most commonly addressed topics also involve board operations or formal legal concerns. They include: board and superintendent relations (79.4 percent), leadership skills (76.5 percent), legal issues in education (74.8 percent), and board accountability (71.9 percent). Board members are less frequently trained in the areas of communications, budgeting, student achievement, and community engagement or partnerships. Even in these areas, however, a majority of respondents have received training.

Large districts provide substantially more training than their smaller peers. Respondents report that large districts train at least 75 percent of board members in seven of the 11 areas about which the survey inquired. Large districts are especially likely to train members in areas like community engagement and partnerships, student achievement, communications, and strategic planning. This added training, and the emphasis on substantive board activity, may reflect the more extensive and more varied demands on large-district board members.

TABLE 13: PERCENTAGE OF BOARD MEMBERS RECEIVING TRAINING IN VARIOUS AREAS

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Board member roles and responsibilities	97.8 percent	92.8 percent	94.4 percent	94.3 percent
Board and superintendent relations	88.0 percent	79.1 percent	77.4 percent	79.4 percent
Leadership skills	84.8 percent	77.8 percent	74.0 percent	76.5 percent
Legal issues in education	79.3 percent	74.5 percent	73.8 percent	74.8 percent
Board accountability	76.1 percent	70.3 percent	72.0 percent	71.9 percent
Communications	81.5 percent	63.4 percent	62.6 percent	65.2 percent
Budget/resource allocation	70.7 percent	65.4 percent	61.8 percent	64.5 percent
Student achievement issues	75.0 percent	65.7 percent	59.5 percent	63.8 percent
Strategic planning	72.8 percent	61.8 percent	62.8 percent	63.7 percent
Community engagement	71.7 percent	59.2 percent	52.9 percent	57.8 percent
Community collaborations/ partnerships	63.0 percent	54.9 percent	43.0 percent	50.2 percent
Total districts	92	306	393	801

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

The percentage of board members trained in a given area does not indicate whether districts are providing too much, too little, or just the right amount of preparation. One way to address that question is to ask the board members themselves. Table 14 depicts the percentage of board members who desire additional training in each of the areas addressed in Table 13. In general, respondents indicate limited interest in additional training, with 10 percent to 20 percent desiring additional training on most topics.

The areas of greatest concern are student achievement and community collaboration, where one in five respondents would like additional training. Other areas of moderate concern included strategic planning, budgeting, and community engagement. The area of least concern is "board member roles and responsibilities," where respondents have already received extensive training and where just 5.7 percent desire additional preparation. In general, respondents are more interested in receiving training in those areas where they currently receive less preparation.

It is interesting to note that small-district board members-despite the fact that their positions may make fewer demands on them because of smaller enrollments-desire additional training more than their large-district peers. Presumably, this is due to the more extensive training of large-district members and to the knowledge that they absorb in the course of the additional time they devote to board business. Nearly a quarter of small-district respondents want additional training in the areas of student achievement and community collaboration, and more than 20 percent want training in community engagement. The only area where large-district respondents show similar concern is board accountability, an issue that is particularly pressing for struggling school districts that are seeking ways to focus on achievement, pursue systemic improvement, and cope with heightened state demands for demonstrated performance.

TABLE 14: AREAS IN WHICH BOARD MEMBERS DESIRE ADDITIONAL TRAINING

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Student achievement issues	16.3 percent	20.9 percent	24.4 percent	22.1 percent
Community collaborations/ partnerships	14.1 percent	20.3 percent	24.7 percent	21.7 percent
Strategic planning	18.5 percent	21.2 percent	18.8 percent	19.5 percent
Budget/resource allocation	19.6 percent	19.3 percent	18.6 percent	19.0 percent
Community engagement	12.0 percent	18.6 percent	20.1 percent	18.6 percent
Board accountability	25.0 percent	15.4 percent	14.5 percent	16.1 percent
Legal issues in education	18.5 percent	16.0 percent	14.0 percent	15.5 percent
Leadership skills	14.1 percent	12.4 percent	15.3 percent	14.0 percent
Communications	5.4 percent	12.7 percent	13.7 percent	12.5 percent
Board and superintendent relations	7.6 percent	11.4 percent	11.5 percent	11.1 percent
Board member roles and responsibilities	5.4 percent	6.9 percent	5.1 percent	5.7 percent
Total districts	92	306	393	801

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Respondents report that about half of all boards engage in an annual self-evaluation, with another 7 percent doing so more frequently and about one-fifth of boards never evaluating themselves. Regardless of district size, about one-fifth to one-fourth of boards do not conduct self-evaluations.

Board Member Compensation

Two-thirds of the 759 respondents who provided information about compensation report receiving no salary for their board service (see Table 15). Another 9.6 percent report that they earn less than $2,000 a year. Just one in five respondents is paid $2,000 or more a year in board salary, and only 3.4 percent are paid $10,000 or more. In general, about three-fourths of board members earn little or nothing for their service.

Again, these general figures mask significant variation across districts. Almost 90 percent of small-district respondents earn $2,000 a year or less, and none reports earning as much as $10,000 a year. While most large-district boards are also generally unpaid, nearly a quarter of large-district respondents do earn $10,000 or more per year for their service. Compensation in large districts is put into perspective by the earlier finding that a substantial number of board members report devoting 20 hours or more a week to board affairs.

Table 15: School Board Salaries

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
None	51.8 percent	60.9 percent	75.5 percent	67.2 percent
Less than $2,000	3.6 percent	8.8 percent	11.6 percent	9.6 percent
$2,000-$9,999	21.7 percent	27.9 percent	12.9 percent	19.8 percent
$10,000-$20,000	9.6 percent	1.3 percent	0 percent	1.6 percent
More than $20,000	13.3 percent	1.0 percent	0 percent	1.8 percent
Total districts	83	297	379	759

About one-fifth of respondents also receive a per-meeting stipend, in addition to any salary for their board service. Of the 152 board members reporting a stipend, the amounts ranged from $5 to $600 (N=152), with a median of about $63. Given that the typical board member reports attending about 22 or 23 meetings a year, a crude estimate is that the median board member's stipend is worth about $1,300 a year.

Superintendents and School Boards

Perhaps the most significant role school boards fill is that of selecting and overseeing the district superintendent. How do board members choose and evaluate superintendents?[9] What qualities do they seek? While information on superintendents is collected and reported by other organizations, a brief portrait of the superintendents in the sample districts may prove useful here.[10] Consequently, for superintendents in the sample districts, data are presented on the length of time they have served, whether their boards hired them from inside or outside the system, and their race and gender. More significantly, we then consider the largely unexplored question of what board members emphasize when assessing superintendent performance.

Superintendent Tenure and Hiring

Large-district superintendents have typically been in place for four years, and those in medium and small districts for five and six years respectively (see Table 16). The wide standard deviations reported make clear that some superintendents serve for a lengthy period of time, while others have been in place for less than the indicated mean. It should also be noted that the following figures were derived from the tenure of current superintendents and that in many cases these superintendents may continue to serve for years to come before they complete their tenures.[11]

9. For an in-depth discussion of some of the dynamics driving board selection of superintendents, see Frederick M. Hess, 1998, "The Urban Reform Paradox," American School Board Journal, v185, n2: 24-27.

10. For the most recent and complete national study of superintendents, see Bruce S. Cooper, Lance D. Fusarelli, and Vincent A. Carella. 2000. "Career Crisis in the School Superintendency? The Results of a National Survey." Washington DC: American Association of School Administrators.

11. These findings are borne out by a recent survey by the National School Boards Association's Council of Urban Boards of Education. That survey found that the average tenure for superintendents in the 50 largest U.S. cities is 4.6 years; for superintendents in the 77 CUBE districts, the average tenure is 5 years. See CUBE Survey Report: Superintendent Tenure. Alexandria, Va.: NSBA, 2002.

Table 16: Length of Time Current Superintendent Has Served in District

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Mean (Standard Deviation)	4.15 (3.33)	5.24 (4.61)	6.03 (5.05)	5.48 (4.73)
Total districts	88	298	377	774

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Where did the current superintendents come from? Respondents report that two-thirds were hired from outside the district (see Table 17). This may pose challenges for districts as they seek to sustain or foster continuity in programs or reform efforts, and it may indicate that greater attention should be paid to leadership development within districts. Districts of all sizes tend to hire new leaders from outside the district, but the tendency is more pronounced in small districts where the pool of potential leaders is presumably smallest. While roughly 60 percent of large-district boards hired their current superintendent from outside the district, more than 70 percent of small-district boards did so.

Table 17: Are Superintendents Promoted from Within or Hired from Outside the District?

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Promoted from within	38.9 percent	39.5 percent	28.5 percent	33.8 percent
Hired from outside	61.1 percent	60.5 percent	71.5 percent	66.2 percent
Total districts	90	304	386	789

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Superintendent Demographics

Respondents report that the vast majority of superintendents, across districts of all sizes, are white (see Table 18). Even in large districts, which tend to be more diverse than smaller districts and where there is often a more concerted effort to recruit minority leadership, more than 80 percent of superintendents in the sample districts are white, 12.2 percent are African-American, and 5.6 percent are Hispanic. In small districts, more than 93 percent of superintendents are white, while 4.9 percent African-American or Hispanic. Respondents also indicate that 15.8 percent of superintendents are women, a figure that is essentially constant across districts of all sizes (n = 795). While top school administrators increasingly reflect the makeup of the national population, they are still disproportionately white and male.

Table 18: Ethnicity of Current Superintendent

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
White	81.1 percent	89.2 percent	93.5 percent	90.1 percent
African-American	12.2 percent	4.9 percent	2.6 percent	4.7 percent
Hispanic	5.6 percent	3.0 percent	2.3 percent	3.0 percent
Other	1.1 percent	2.9 percent	1.6 percent	2.2 percent
Total districts	90	305	385	789

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Board Evaluation of the Superintendent

Perhaps the most important issue in the school board-superintendent relationship is the way boards evaluate the superintendent's performance. A crucial piece of that puzzle is what factors the board chooses to emphasize in the evaluation. Respondents assert that the three most critical factors are the board-superintendent relationship, the morale of school system employees, and the safety of the district's students (see Table 19). In each case, 80 percent or more of respondents term the issue "very important," and more than 95 percent term it "somewhat" or "very" important. The responses reflect the importance of the board-superintendent relationship and the building blocks for effective district governance and administration. The responses also reflect recognition that a well-functioning leadership team provides a foundation for effective governance and administration and an environment in which student achievement can be fostered.

Table 19: What Board Members Focus on in Assessing Superintendent Performance

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Occasionally Important	Not Important	Observations
Relationship with school board	86.4 percent	12.1 percent	1.0 percent	0.3 percent	784
Morale of system teachers and administrators	80.5 percent	16.6 percent	1.5 percent	1.0 percent	781
Safety of district students	79.6 percent	16.7 percent	2.4 percent	1.0 percent	785
System and facility management	67.9 percent	27.3 percent	4.2 percent	0.3 percent	783
District performance on standardized measures	65.7 percent	29.3 percent	3.3 percent	1.4 percent	781
Parental satisfaction	62.7 percent	31.6 percent	4.7 percent	0.6 percent	781
Relationship with community leaders	62.2 percent	30.6 percent	6.1 percent	0.8 percent	784
Success of pedagogical or curricular reforms	54.6 percent	37.2 percent	6.1 percent	1.9 percent	775
Efforts to upgrade educational technology	50.6 percent	42.0 percent	5.6 percent	1.5 percent	784
Efforts to address racial/ ethnic concerns	39.8 percent	32.2 percent	16.7 percent	11.1 percent	767

Does the relative importance of the concerns addressed in Table 19 vary with district size? On the leading considerations, there is little variation (see Table 20). However, significant differences emerge on issues of performance on standardized assessments, relations with community leaders, success of reform initiatives, and efforts to address issues of race and ethnicity. The biggest single difference between large and small districts is on the issue of race relations, with 56 percent of large-district respondents terming the superintendent's efforts in that area "very important," compared with only 32 percent of small-district respondents. This finding is not unexpected, given the relatively urban cast of large districts and the relatively diverse makeup of their communities, student populations, and school boards.

Board members in large districts are also more likely than those from smaller districts to view district performance on standardized measures as "very important" in evaluating the superintendent. In fact, this measure is the number two criterion in large districts but ranks fifth in small and mid-sized districts. Respondents in large districts are also substantially more concerned with relations between the superintendent and community leaders and with the success of curricular or pedagogical reforms than are their peers in smaller districts.

Again, given the relative urban cast of large districts and the relative diverse makeup of their communities and student populations, their greater emphasis on measurable district performance and community relations is not surprising.

Table 20: Percentage of Board Members Terming Each Issue "Very Important" in Assessing Superintendent Performance (By District Size)

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Relationship with school board	87.5 percent	88.1 percent	85.2 percent	86.6 percent
Morale of system teachers and administrators	76.1 percent	80.8 percent	81.7 percent	80.8 percent
Safety of district students	75.0 percent	82.9 percent	78.1 percent	79.9 percent
System and facility management	64.8 percent	63.7 percent	72.3 percent	68.2 percent
District performance on standardized measures	78.4 percent	68.2 percent	61.8 percent	65.9 percent
Parental satisfaction	61.4 percent	65.3 percent	61.4 percent	63.0 percent
Relationship with community leaders	70.5 percent	68.3 percent	56.0 percent	62.5 percent
Success of pedagogical or curricular reforms	62.5 percent	58.4 percent	50.7 percent	54.8 percent
Efforts to upgrade educational technology	52.3 percent	47.5 percent	53.1 percent	50.9 percent
Efforts to address racial/ ethnic concerns	56.3 percent	45.1 percent	31.8 percent	40.0 percent
Total districts	88	303	384	785

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Summary

For most school board members, their service is neither a crushing burden nor an insignificant task. They generally devote about five hours a week to board business-not an insignificant obligation for the working parents who commonly serve on school boards. In large districts, the time demands are much more severe, which may help explain why large-district boards include such a substantial contingent of homemakers and retirees (refer to the following section profiling board members). In addition to board service, board members also generally serve on other community or civic boards that may add depth to or compliment their board service.

Board members are trained in a number of areas and are relatively content with their training. They receive less preparation in areas of substantive educational concern than in issues of governance or formal board obligations. Consequently, while board members are generally satisfied with their preparation, the additional training they do desire generally relates to student achievement, planning, and community involvement. Except in a few large systems, most board members earn little or nothing for their term of service.

In general, the responses suggest that, in evaluating their superintendents, board members are very concerned about the elements that serve as the building blocks of governance and administrative oversight-the board-superintendent relationship, the morale of school system personnel, student safety, and management of school facilities. The emphasis on student performance and related considerations varies with district size. Further research is needed to enhance the understanding of the impact of district size and needs on the evaluation of superintendent performance.

III. A Profile of School Boards

Now that we have looked at policy issues and school board member service and preparation, let us turn to the characteristics of school boards and board members and how school boards are structured. Who serves on today's school boards? What are the demographics of school board members? How big are school boards? How long are board members' terms? Do boards make frequent use of committees? How much financial independence do they have? These questions have been sources of longstanding interest, with researchers making periodic efforts to address them for more than 70 years.

Ethnic and Gender Composition of Boards

Board members were asked to report the ethnic composition of their board. School boards are somewhat less racially diverse than is the nation as a whole, but are more ethnically diverse than most state and national elective bodies. Respondents report that the boards on which they serve are about 85.5 percent white, 7.8 percent African-American, and 3.8 percent Hispanic (see Table 21). The makeup of boards varies dramatically with district size. In large districts, which tend to be more urban and more racially heterogeneous, respondents report that more than 20 percent of board members are African-American or Hispanic. In small districts, by comparison, boards are about 11 percent nonwhite.

Table 21: Racial Composition of Boards

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Percent white	78.9 percent	83.1 percent	89.2 percent	85.5 percent
Percent African-American	13.0 percent	9.4 percent	5.3 percent	7.8 percent
Percent Hispanic	7.5 percent	3.7 percent	3.1 percent	3.8 percent
Percent other	0.9 percent	3.7 percent	2.3 percent	2.3 percent
Total districts	93	307	389	789

Table 22 provides another perspective on school board racial composition. Nearly two-thirds of boards are no more than 10 percent African-American and Hispanic. Large districts are far more likely than small districts to have a significant nonwhite membership. Two-thirds of large-district boards are more than 10 percent nonwhite, and nearly a third are more than 20 percent nonwhite. On the other hand, roughly four in five small-district boards are at least 90 percent white.

Table 22: Percentage of Board That Is African-American or Hispanic

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
10 percent or less	36.3 percent	58.5 percent	78.5 percent	65.8 percent
11 percent-20 percent	28.6 percent	20.6 percent	9.1 percent	15.8 percent
21 percent-40 percent	18.7 percent	11.3 percent	4.9 percent	9.2 percent
41 percent-60 percent	9.9 percent	6.0 percent	4.1 percent	5.5 percent
More than 60 percent	6.6 percent	3.7 percent	3.4 percent	3.8 percent
Total districts	91	301	386	786

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

As for gender, respondents report that more than 60 percent of board members in the sample districts are male (see Table 23). The gap is much bigger in small districts: Large-district boards are about 55 percent male, and small-district boards are more than 63 percent male.

Table 23: Gender Composition of Boards

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Male	55.6 percent	60.1 percent	63.3 percent	61.1 percent
Female	44.4 percent	39.9 percent	36.7 percent	38.9 percent
Total districts	94	310	396	811

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Board Member Background

Board members typically have an annual household income that exceeds the national average. Most report incomes of more than $75,000 a year (see Table 24), compared to a national average of $49,692, according to 1997 figures from the U.S Census Bureau. While just a handful of members report family incomes of $200,000 or more a year, more than 80 percent earn at least $50,000. Board members fall predominantly into the upper-middle class, a pattern than holds across districts of all sizes. Even in small districts, which are reported to be predominantly rural, most board members have an annual household income of more than $75,000. In large districts, nearly one-fourth of board members report family incomes of $150,000 or more, and more than 60 percent earn $75,000 or more. While board members receive little compensation for their board service, most still enjoy a comfortable household income.

Table 24: Board Members' Annual Household Income

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Less than $25,000	2.2 percent	1.0 percent	2.7 percent	2.0 percent
$25,000-$49,999	13.3 percent	9.6 percent	19.2 percent	14.8 percent
$50,000-$74,999	22.2 percent	20.2 percent	27.6 percent	24.1 percent
$75,000-$99,999	20.0 percent	27.7 percent	18.4 percent	22.2 percent
$100,000-$149,999	18.9 percent	24.0 percent	19.8 percent	21.3 percent
$150,000-$200,000	17.8 percent	11.6 percent	8.4 percent	10.8 percent
More than $200,000	5.6 percent	5.8 percent	3.8 percent	4.8 percent
Total districts	90	292	369	751

The question read: "What is your family's approximate annual income (total household income)?"

What occupations do these relatively affluent board members follow? Professional background, for the 790 respondents who provided the information, is presented in Table 25. Nearly 45 percent of these respondents identify themselves as professionals or businessmen, and more than one-fourth are homemakers or retirees. Just 13 percent of respondents report a professional background in education. The rest work in a variety of fields that include the nonprofit and public sectors.

Large-district boards have fewer professionals or businessmen, and more educators, retirees, and homemakers, than do small-district boards. In fact, a little over 50 percent of the large-district respondents are homemakers, retirees, and educators, compared with only a third of small-district respondents. The reason for this is unclear, but it would not be unreasonable to suggest that board service is more a civic obligation for professionals and businessmen in small communities and more a chosen avocation in larger districts.

TABLE 25: BOARD MEMBERS' PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Business/professional	38.3 percent	41.9 percent	48.2 percent	44.6 percent
Homemaker/retired	34.0 percent	28.4 percent	22.5 percent	26.2 percent
Education	18.1 percent	11.3 percent	13.2 percent	13.0 percent
Nonprofit/government	6.4 percent	13.5 percent	9.3 percent	10.6 percent
Other	3.2 percent	4.8 percent	6.7 percent	5.6 percent
Total districts	94	310	386	790

Judging from the 813 respondents who provided information on their educational background, board members as a group are significantly more educated than the broader American public. Based on U.S. Census Bureau high-end projections for 2003, the education attainment for the U.S. population age 25 and older is anticipated to be: high school, 84 percent; post secondary, 50.9 percent; and bachelors, 25.6 percent. However, two-thirds of the respondents report that they are college graduates, and nearly 40 percent hold a graduate degree (see Table 26). More than 90 percent of board members have attended at least some college. The most educated board members serve in the large districts, where more than three-quarters of respondents have graduated from a four-year college and a majority have a graduate degree. Even in smaller, more rural districts, more than half of board members have graduated from a four-year college and just over a quarter hold a graduate degree.

TABLE 26: BOARD MEMBERS' EDUCATION

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Did not graduate from high school	0 percent	1.3 percent	0.3 percent	0.6 percent
High school graduate	3.2 percent	3.2 percent	9.1 percent	6.2 percent
Some college	18.1 percent	15.1 percent	37.0 percent	26.2 percent
Four-year college degree	27.7 percent	33.4 percent	24.9 percent	28.7 percent
Graduate degree	51.5 percent	46.9 percent	28.5 percent	38.3 percent
Total districts	94	11	397	813

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Three-quarters of board members report they are between 40 and 59 years old (see Table 27). Another one-fifth are 60 or older, while just 5.9 percent are under 40. Respondents from large districts are generally older than their counterparts in smaller districts. Nearly one-third of large-district board members are 60 or older, while the rate in small districts is less than half of that. In small districts, board service is primarily left to those in early middle age, while nearly 70 percent of large-district board members are 50 or older.

Table 27: Age of Board Members

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
20-29	1.1 percent	0.6 percent	0.3 percent	0.5 percent
30-39	2.1 percent	3.9 percent	7.3 percent	5.4 percent
40-49	27.7 percent	32.8 percent	48.9 percent	40.1 percent
50-59	37.2 percent	37.0 percent	30.4 percent	33.8 percent
60 or older	31.9 percent	25.7 percent	13.2 percent	20.3 percent
Total districts	94	311	395	800

Almost all board members (96 percent) are parents, and about half of them (48.9 percent) have children currently in school. Of the parents, 77.3 percent report that all of their children have attended public school, 13.3 percent that none of their children attended public school, and the rest that their children had attended a mix of public and private schools.

Board Structure

More than 80 percent of the respondents' school boards have between five and eight members (see Table 28). While odd-numbered boards are more common than even-numbered boards, respondents also report some six- and eight-member boards. Another 14.3 percent of boards have nine members, while less than 5 percent of boards have fewer than five members or more than nine. Large districts are significantly more likely than other districts to have boards with nine or more members and much less likely to have fewer than seven members. More than 26 percent of large district boards include nine or more members, and nearly half of those numbered 10 or more.

Table 28: Size of School Boards

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Percent with fewer than 5 members	0 percent	0 percent	1.8 percent	0.9 percent
Percent with 5 - 6 members	25.5 percent	34.6 percent	41.5 percent	36.9 percent
Percent with 7 - 8 members	47.9 percent	47.4 percent	41.7 percent	44.7 percent
Percent with 9 Members	16.0 percent	15.1 percent	13.3 percent	14.3 percent
Percent with more than 9 members	10.6 percent	2.9 percent	1.8 percent	3.2 percent
Total districts	94	312	398	804

More than 90 percent of board members serve terms of no more than four years. In the sample districts, more than 60 percent of board members serve a four-year term, and most of the rest serve terms of less than four years (see Table 29). Board member terms tend to be shorter in small districts than in larger ones.

Table 29: Term Length of Elected Board Members

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Less than 4 years	25.6 percent	26.6 percent	34.5 percent	30.4 percent
4 years	67.8 percent	69.4 percent	57.2 percent	63.2 percent
5 - 6 years	6.7 percent	4.0 percent	8.4 percent	6.5 percent
Total districts	90	301	383	774

The terms of appointed board members are generally shorter than those of their elected counterparts. The 61 respondents who report that some or all district board members are appointed indicate that 67.2 percent of these members serve terms of less than four years, 18 percent serve five- or six-year terms, and just 14.8 percent serve four-year terms. Although appointed board members generally have shorter terms of office than elected members, nearly three times as many of them are granted terms of more than four years.

Board Committees

Respondents report that the typical school board employs about five committees, with the most common being budget/finance, building facilities, and policy (see Table 30). About two-thirds of school boards have such committees, while one-third of sample boards have a community engagement committee, and about 40 percent have a security committee. Surprisingly, although small-district boards oversee fewer students and include fewer members, they are more likely to use committees than their large-district counterparts.

Table 30: School Board Committees

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Budget/finance	66.3 percent	70.4 percent	71.8 percent	70.5 percent
Building facilities	56.6 percent	64.0 percent	66.2 percent	64.1 percent
Policy	60.2 percent	60.9 percent	68.3 percent	64.0 percent
Technology	53.0 percent	55.9 percent	59.0 percent	57.1 percent
Personnel	45.8 percent	48.8 percent	60.4 percent	53.9 percent
Strategic planning	41.0 percent	52.2 percent	54.5 percent	51.8 percent
Student achievement	41.0 percent	49.2 percent	50.5 percent	48.8 percent
Legislative/government issues	47.0 percent	46.1 percent	51.3 percent	48.8 percent
Security	37.3 percent	37.0 percent	44.1 percent	40.7 percent
Community engagement	37.3 percent	33.3 percent	32.2 percent	32.9 percent
Total districts	83	297	376	765

Percentage of respondents indicating that their board has each of the listed committees.
Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Financial Independence of Board

The vast majority of school boards are financially independent from the general city or county government. Respondents report that just 15 percent of boards need the municipal government to approve their budget (Table 31), and just 17 percent need it to approve a proposed bond issue (Table 32).

Table 31: City/County Government Approval Required for Board Budget

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Yes	21.0 percent	15.6 percent	12.8 percent	15.0 percent
No	79.0 percent	84.4 percent	87.2 percent	85.0 percent
Total districts	81	275	337	700

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

On both budgeting and issuing bonds, large districts are significantly more likely than small districts to require the approval of a municipal government. For instance, respondents report that more than 25 percent of large-district boards need such approval to issue bonds, compared with only 14 percent of small-district boards. In smaller districts, boards are more likely to have the authority to initiate financial activities on their own initiative.

Table 32: City/County Government Approval Required for Board to Issue Bond

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Yes	25.3 percent	17.3 percent	14.1 percent	16.8 percent
No	74.7 percent	82.7 percent	85.9 percent	83.2 percent
Total districts	75	255	311	649

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Consistent with the financial independence that characterizes the vast majority of school boards, respondents report that nearly 85 percent of boards have a tax base against which the board is able to levy taxes (see Table 33). Again, independent financial authority is somewhat more common in small districts than in large.

Table 33: Does District Have a Tax Base Against Which It Is Permitted to Levy Taxes?

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Yes	78.3 percent	80.8 percent	88.1 percent	84.0 percent
No	21.7 percent	18.9 percent	11.9 percent	15.9 percent
Total districts	83	291	370	754

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Summary

The age, professional profile, and time commitment of large-district board members make it unlikely that many are using school boards as political stepping stones. Instead, such boards appear to be dominated by retirees and people in late middle age, who may be more likely to have the time and interest that the position demands. Meanwhile, the profile of small-district board members suggests that these boards are places where rising business and professional figures serve one or two uncompensated and (as indicated in the next section) apolitical terms as a career-building civic obligation.

Today, school boards generally include six to eight members; only rarely are there more than nine. The 13- and 15-member boards that governed many large systems just a few decades ago are no longer in evidence. Board members generally serve four-year terms, though a significant number serve shorter terms. Boards use committees for a variety of purposes, though it is not clear how much influence committee members actually enjoy. The vast majority of boards-especially outside of urban centers-are financially independent of the general municipal government.

IV. Board Elections

As public entities, school boards historically embodied a "nonpolitical" ideal championed by Progressive reformers at the dawn of the 20th century. In recent years, however, efforts to radically alter these arrangements have been launched in some districts, while high-profile political conflicts have erupted in others. A number of obvious questions arise: How much of the Progressive tradition remains today? How are board members chosen? How are board elections conducted? How active are interested constituencies and how significant an issue is campaign spending in board elections? And how long do board members serve?

Elected vs. Appointed and At-large vs. Sub-district

While there has been significant attention in recent years to appointed school boards-in cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, or Boston-the results make clear that the overwhelming majority of board members are elected. The 814 respondents who provided information on this question indicated that 96.2 percent of the membership on their board is elected (see Table 34). This holds in both large and small districts. Moreover, more than 93 percent of the boards are entirely elected, while 3.8 percent are composed of both elected and appointed members.[12] Respondents report that just 2.8 percent of their boards are entirely appointed.

Overall, respondents indicate that about 4 percent of members on their boards are appointed. These members are selected in various ways. Appointments are most frequently made by the board or a board officer filling a vacant position (37.1 percent), by a city or town council (12.9 percent), and by the mayor (9.7 percent). Other appointing entities include the state, a combination of city council and township board, the governor, the superintendent, the board of aldermen, and a probate judge.

Table 34: Election vs. Appointment

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Percent of members elected	95.9 percent	95.5 percent	96.7 percent	96.2 percent
Percent of members appointed	4.2 percent	4.5 percent	3.5 percent	4.0 percent
Total districts	94	312	397	814

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

If board members are elected, are they chosen from subdistricts, or are they elected districtwide in at-large elections? On the boards upon which respondents serve, more than 56 percent of members are elected at large, and 41 percent are elected by subdistrict (see Table 35). The smallest districts, for reasons that are not clear, are the least likely to elect board members at-large. Districts with fewer than 5,000 students are only slightly more likely to elect board members at-large than by subdistrict, while large districts are somewhat more likely to do so. For reasons that are not immediately clear, medium-sized districts are more likely to elect their board members districtwide than are either large or small districts.

12. Roughly three-quarters of the mixed boards were dominated by elected members, with two-thirds of these reporting that appointed members were either board members selected by the current board or student representatives.

Table 35: How Board Members are Elected

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Percent of members elected at-large	56.5 percent	64.5 percent	50.4 percent	56.7 percent
Percent of members elected by subdistrict	42.6 percent	35.3 percent	45.6 percent	41.1 percent
Total districts	85	281	367	745

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Apolitical Elections

A legacy of school governance left from the Progressive Era century was the desire to remove politics from education. Progressives argued that there was "no Democratic or Republican way to pave a road" or to run a school, and sought to drain any partisan fervor from the electoral process. In order to separate partisan politics from schooling, Progressives fought to remove party affiliations from school board elections and to schedule board elections on days when more partisan elections were not being held.

Of the 765 respondents reporting that local board members are elected, more than 89 percent report that elections are nonpartisan. In other words, candidates are identified as members of a political party in just 10 percent of school board elections.

Not only are board elections divorced from political competition, they are often isolated from more high-profile campaigns. Less than half of district elections (46.5 percent) are always held on the same day as national or state elections, while 34.7 percent are never held on the same day as such elections. Approximately a third of districts (34.2 percent) always hold board elections on the same day as mayoral or city council elections, while 35.7 percent never hold them on the same day as such elections. Rather than being held when voters are already going to the polls for more visible elections, board elections are held at times when the body politic is more inactive. This timing is not an accident, but an artifact of Progressive reforms that sought to remove partisan politics from school board elections.

Given the scheduling of school board elections and their nonpartisan cast, it is not surprising that low rates of voter participation are discussed by those interested in school board reform. While systematic data is unavailable, it is not unusual for school board elections to report turnouts of 20 percent or less. Only half of the 765 respondents serving in districts with board elections report the voter turnout rate for the most recent election. They report a median turnout of 31 percent, though the high degree of nonresponse on this question suggests this figure should be treated with caution. Care should also be taken not to over-interpret voter turnout data and to incorporate voter behavior concepts into discussion and debate. To illustrate, "dissatisfaction theory" (Iannaconne and Lutz, 1994) holds that when voters believe representatives have strayed too far from community values and needs, they will become active participants in elections and remove the representatives in question from office.[13] The corollary is that voter inactivity may indicate satisfaction and shared values.

More significant is the pattern that emerges in Table 36, which reports the relationship between when local elections are held and the reported voter turnout. Regardless of the accuracy of particular turnout estimates, the pattern suggests that timing board elections to coincide with "higher profile/ higher-stakes" elections produces significantly higher turnout. Districts that always hold their elections on the same day as national or state elections have a reported turnout that is 18 percentage

13. Abe Feuerstein, 2002, "Elections, Voting, and Democracy in Local School District Governance," Educational Policy, v16, n1: 15-36.

points higher than districts that never do so; districts that always hold elections on the same day as mayoral or city council elections report a similar 12 percentage point gap. While the turnout data ought to be treated with caution, it appears that turnout for board elections could be significantly increased if districts altered their timing.

TABLE 36: TIMING OF BOARD ELECTIONS AND VOTER TURNOUT

	Turnout Percent When Board Elections Always Held on Same Day	Turnout Percent When Board Elections Never Held on Same Day	Increase When Board Elections Are Held with More Visible Election
National/state and school board elections	43.8 percent	25.8 percent	+18.0 percent
Mayoral/city council and school board elections	41.8 percent	29.1 percent	+12.7 percent

Turnout percentage is respondent's estimate of the percentage of registered voters who voted in the most recent local school board election.

Money and School Board Elections

How much does it cost to win a school board seat? The accounts that make the press tend to be the noteworthy urban contests, such as recent campaigns in San Diego, Milwaukee, or Los Angeles, where candidates may spend tens of thousands of dollars. But as Table 37 shows, such races are anything but typical. More than three-fourths of respondents spent less than $1,000 to win their most recent election. In fact, a substantial number note that they spent not one dollar in their most recent campaign. Of the remaining respondents, 14.7 percent report spending between $1,000 and $4,999; 4.6 percent spent between $5,000 and $9,999; and 4.3 percent spent $10,000 or more. Interestingly, while partisan elections might be assumed to be more costly than nonpartisan ones, analysis uncovers no relationship.

The aggregate findings on spending mask stark differences between large and small districts. While no respondents from small districts spent $10,000 on their most recent campaign and more than 94 percent spent less than $1,000, nearly 25 percent of respondents in large districts spent $10,000 or more. The majority of these candidates still spent less than $5,000, yet it is clear that some large-district races begin to approximate the electoral dynamics generally associated with higher-profile legislative elections.

TABLE 37: AMOUNT SPENT ON MOST RECENT BOARD CAMPAIGN

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
$0-999	37.6 percent	63.8 percent	94.7 percent	75.6 percent
$1,000-$4,999	24.7 percent	24.9 percent	3.6 percent	14.7 percent
$5,000-$9,999	12.9 percent	6.8 percent	0.6 percent	4.6 percent
$10,000-$24,999	18.8 percent	3.8 percent	0	3.6 percent
$25,000 or More	5.9 percent	0.3 percent	0	0.7 percent
Total districts	85	293	358	746

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Where does the money for board elections come from? Given their greater need for campaign resources, do board members in large districts tap different sources than their colleagues in small districts? These questions are addressed in Tables 38 and 39. As might be expected, given the relatively low cost of most school board races, respondents generally report financing their most recent campaign primarily out of their own funds and with contributions from friends and family. Overall, 67 percent report that they spent personal wealth on their election, and more than half say they received support from friends or family. Less than a third say they received contributions from any other source.

TABLE 38: PERCENTAGE OF BOARD MEMBERS RAISING CAMPAIGN FUNDS FROM EACH SOURCE

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Personal wealth	72.5 percent	75.6 percent	58.2 percent	67.1 percent
Family and friends	83.8 percent	66.5 percent	29.8 percent	52.1 percent
Employee unions	61.4 percent	27.9 percent	6.8 percent	21.9 percent
Business community	67.9 percent	37.4 percent	8.6 percent	27.0 percent
Religiously affiliated groups	14.7 percent	9.6 percent	4.2 percent	7.5 percent
Total districts	69	246	287	602

Substantial differences emerge between large and small districts in campaign fund-raising. In small districts, 58.2 percent of board members report contributing to their own campaigns, and 29.8 percent say they raised funds from family or friends (see Table 38). Less than 10 percent collected contributions from any other source. In large districts, on the other hand, more than 60 percent of respondents report having collected contributions from employee unions and from the business community. These groups played a more modest role in medium-sized districts and were practically absent in small districts.

Table 39 shows the number of board members who collect more than 50 percent of their campaign contributions from each of the listed sources. The vast majority of board members receive the majority of their funding from their personal wealth, family, or friends, although nearly 40 percent of large-district members collect a majority of their funding from unions or from the business community.

TABLE 39: SOURCE OF 50 PERCENT OR MORE OF BOARD MEMBER CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Personal wealth	30.4 percent	43.6 percent	44.9 percent	42.8 percent
Family and friends	31.1 percent	26.1 percent	9.4 percent	19.1 percent
Employee unions	20.5 percent	2.9 percent	0.5 percent	1.4 percent
Business community	18.9 percent	3.4 percent	0 percent	3.5 percent
Religiously affiliated Groups	0 percent	0 percent	0 percent	0 percent
Other/unknown	0 percent	24.0 percent	45.2 percent	33.2 percent
Total districts	74	250	294	621

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Tables 38 and 39 imply that-except in a minority of large-district races-teacher unions and the business community play a limited role in board elections, a finding that conflicts with the claims of many critics of district governance. It is important to note, however, that these tables only measure whether candidates received direct contributions from the listed groups. Teacher unions and, to a lesser extent, the business community, have many other ways of participating in elections or seeking to alter board deliberations. Consequently, the larger significance of these findings ought to be treated with some caution.

How Competitive Are School Board Elections?

Given the lack of systematic data on board elections, it is hard to accurately gauge just how competitive board races are. While low rates of turnout and minimal expenditures hint that these elections are not very competitive, additional insight can be gleaned by considering the number of incumbents who are unseated, examining the extent of interest-group activity, and asking board members for their thoughts on electoral competitiveness.

Popular accounts quite naturally tend to focus on dramatic situations in which board members are defeated, but this is the exception, not the rule. Asked to report the number of incumbent board members unseated from beginning of 1998 through spring 2001, nearly half of the 736 respondents (47.4 percent) indicate that no incumbents had been defeated, and more than three-quarters report either zero or one board member defeated (see Table 40). Given that most elected board members serve a four-year term, and that most other members serve for less than four years, we can estimate that this pattern held during a span in which the typical district held elections for at least half of its school board seats.[14] Unexpectedly, though the rate of incumbent defeat was low in districts of all sizes, small- and medium-sized districts were much more likely than large districts to have had three or more incumbents unseated between 1998 and 2001. The reason for this is not clear. However, a look at U.S. Congressional elections provides some perspective on the re-election of incumbents. Based on U.S. Census Bureau figures for 1964 - 1998, the average re-election rate of incumbents in the House was 93 percent, and in the Senate it was 81 percent. Even in these more high profile elections that took place over an extended period of time, the rate of incumbent defeat was low.

Table 40: Number of Incumbents Defeated by District Size

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
0	49.4 percent	48.1 percent	46.4 percent	47.4 percent
1	32.9 percent	27.4 percent	27.0 percent	27.9 percent
2	12.9 percent	12.3 percent	14.5 percent	13.5 percent
3 or more	4.7 percent	12.3 percent	12.0 percent	11.3 percent
Total districts	85	285	366	736

Respondents' perceptions support the impression that few board elections are hotly contested (see Table 41). Just 15.5 percent of respondents describe their local board elections as "very competitive," while 27.9 percent term them "somewhat competitive." On the less competitive end of the spectrum, a total of 56.6 percent reported their board elections were only "occasionally competitive" or "not competitive." Elections are significantly more contentious in large districts than in small ones, however. Only 2.3 percent of large-district elections are considered "not competitive," and more than 28 percent are called "very competitive." On the other hand, more than 15 percent of elections in small districts are deemed "not competitive," and just 8.7 percent as "very" competitive. Even in large districts, however, nearly half of elections are considered relatively uncompetitive.

14. See Table 29 for data on the term lengths of elected board members.

Table 41: Competitiveness of School Board Elections

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Very competitive	28.4 percent	19.7 percent	8.7 percent	15.5 percent
Somewhat competitive	26.1 percent	30.0 percent	27.2 percent	27.9 percent
Occasionally competitive	43.2 percent	45.9 percent	48.3 percent	46.7 percent
Not competitive	2.3 percent	4.5 percent	15.8 percent	9.9 percent
Total districts	88	290	379	768

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

While the data presented here on campaign fund-raising showed a modest direct role for teacher unions, many critics suggest that unions exert significant influence over board elections. Others have made the same charge in relation to the business community, religious organizations, and racial associations. Of course, such claims are hard to verify or to refute in any systematic way, but it may be useful to learn what board members think about the roles these groups play in board elections.

Table 42 shows the percentage of respondents who describe each of the listed groups as "very active" or "somewhat active" in local school board elections. Teacher unions are considered the most active, with unions and parent groups the only organizations cited by more than 50 percent of respondents. Business groups are mentioned by a third of respondents, and no other group receives much attention. In large districts, all of these groups are deemed much more active than in small districts, with teacher unions considered active in 80 percent of large districts and the business community in nearly 60 percent. Ethnic and racial groups are considered moderately active in large districts but are not thought to be a factor in districts with fewer than 5,000 students.

Table 42: Constituent Groups That Are "Active" in Board Elections

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Teacher unions	79.5 percent	67.6 percent	43.9 percent	57.4 percent
Parent groups	65.8 percent	59.6 percent	43.3 percent	52.1 percent
Business community	57.5 percent	33.1 percent	25.5 percent	32.1 percent
Ethnic or racial groups	44.3 percent	21.6 percent	8.4 percent	18.1 percent
Religious organizations	29.5 percent	17.5 percent	14.1 percent	17.0 percent
School reform coalitions	23.9 percent	16.1 percent	8.0 percent	12.9 percent
Total districts	80	284	360	725

Percentage reporting that each group is "very active" or "somewhat active" in local school board elections. Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Ideology and Term of Service

Elected bodies, by design, reflect the views of their membership. That makes the political leanings of board members an issue of substantial interest. In the course of local disputes, it is often claimed that school boards are ideological forums. Nationally, however, the findings of this study suggest school boards are more centrist than extreme politically, with a plurality of respondents describing their political ideology as "moderate" (see Table 43). Of the 775 respondents who provide information on their political views, more than 44 percent describe themselves as moderate and another 3.9 percent reject any ideological label.

Among the remaining respondents, those who consider themselves conservative outnumber liberals by 35.7 percent to 15.9 percent, or more than two to one. The conservative tilt is less pronounced in the more urban and suburban large and mid-sized districts, though conservatives outnumber liberals even there. In the small, generally rural districts, barely one in eight respondents is liberal, with the remainder evenly split between moderates and conservatives. Overall, school board members are somewhat less liberal than the general population.

TABLE 43: POLITICAL VIEWS OF BOARD MEMBERS

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Liberal	18.7 percent	18.7 percent	12.9 percent	15.9 percent
Moderate	51.6 percent	46.2 percent	41.4 percent	44.5 percent
Conservative	24.2 percent	32.8 percent	40.9 percent	35.7 percent
None of the above	5.5 percent	2.3 percent	4.7 percent	3.9 percent
Total districts	91	305	379	775

The mean period of board service for respondents is 6.7 years (n = 776). A slight majority of board members have served five years or less; a third have served between six and 10 years; and about 18 percent have served more than 10 years (see Table 44). Compared to elected officials in state legislatures or city councils, relatively few board members serve for extended periods. This limits the number of members able to offer the kind of institutional memory borne of long experience. However, a significant number of respondents serve long enough to become familiar with the issues and lend continuity to the board. This pattern holds across districts of all sizes.

TABLE 44: LENGTH OF TIME MEMBERS HAVE SERVED ON THE SCHOOL BOARD

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Less than 2 years	9.6 percent	8.7 percent	12.4 percent	10.6 percent
2-5 years	39.8 percent	42.3 percent	40.2 percent	41.0 percent
6-10 years	32.5 percent	30.7 percent	29.4 percent	30.2 percent
More than 10 years	18.1 percent	18.3 percent	18.0 percent	18.1 percent
Total districts	83	300	378	761

Seeking Another Term

We have seen that incumbents are not usually defeated in board elections. So why do board members, who are generally elected for four-year terms, serve an average of 6.7 years? One likely answer may be the rate at which board members voluntarily retire. Do board members seek to be re-elected or re-appointed after their current term expires? In fact, less than half of the respondents (43.7 percent) say they will definitely seek another term after their current term. Another third have not yet decided whether to pursue another term, and 22 percent of members will definitely not do so (see Table 45). These numbers are relatively constant across districts, although board members in large districts are somewhat more likely than those in smaller districts to desire another term. Again, exhibiting a more sustained commitment to their roles, board members in large districts are somewhat less likely to be undecided on the question of re-election or reappointment and more likely interested in continued service.

Table 45: Do Board Members Plan to Seek Another Term?

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Yes	49.5 percent	43.6 percent	42.3 percent	43.7 percent
No	22.6 percent	21.8 percent	22.4 percent	22.2 percent
Undecided	28.0 percent	34.5 percent	35.3 percent	34.1 percent
Total districts	93	307	388	798

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

Bond Elections

Finally, let us shift our focus from board elections to bond elections. The bond issues that attract notice tend to be those that fail spectacularly, fostering a public impression that many bond proposals fail. Such an outcome is unlikely, however, since district leaders are most likely to pursue a bond election when they feel confident about the measure's prospects.

Overall, 63 percent of the 631 who responded to this question report that their district had at least one bond issue proposed between the beginning of 1997 and spring 2001.[15] Respondents report that 89 percent of their most recent bond proposals passed. Passage rates were constant across districts of all sizes, with 88.7 percent of respondents in large districts reporting passage, 90.1 percent of those in medium-sized districts, and 87.9 percent of those in small districts. Voter support for respondents' most recent bond measures averaged 61.6 percent. In large districts, an average of 63.2 percent of voters supported the most recent bond measure; in small districts, the average was 61.5 percent.

Not surprisingly, in the 460 districts where respondents report the value of the most recent proposed bond issue, the reported value varies dramatically with district enrollment. The 49 large-district respondents reporting on the most recent proposed bond issue report a median value of $94 million (see Table 46).[16] This compared to a median of $31 million reported by the 188 respondents in medium-sized districts and $5.8 million by the 218 respondents in small districts. While bond passage rates were relatively constant across districts of different sizes, the dollar amounts of the issues ranged widely.

Table 46: Amount of Last Bond Issue Proposed

	Large Districts (25,000+)	Medium Districts (5,000-24,999)	Small Districts (Less than 5,000)	All Districts
Median	$94 million	$31 million	$6 million	$15 million
Mean	$190 million	$43 million	$11 million	$43 million
Standard deviation	$420 million	$42 million	$22 million	$150 million
Total districts	49	188	218	460

Includes districts in which enrollment could not be ascertained.

15. During that period, respondents reported that nearly 35 percent of districts had one bond proposed, another 23 percent had two or three, and 5 percent had more than three.

16. Respondents were asked to provide this information only if a bond issue had been proposed since the beginning of 1997.

In the handful of cases in which bond proposals did not pass (n=55), respondents report that the most vocal opponent of the proposal was a community group (35 percent), the local business community (11 percent), a local newspaper (9 percent), local political leaders (7 percent), and some other person or group (38 percent). The small size of this sample makes it inappropriate to render any general comments about differences in districts of varying sizes, although there is some suggestion that political leaders, the business community, and local newspapers were more likely to lead opposition to bond efforts in large districts than in smaller ones.

Summary

Although the subject of appointed school boards has gained increased attention in recent years, more than 95 percent of the nation's board members are elected officials. The elections in which these members are chosen are fundamentally different in large and small districts. Large-district elections are more competitive and more expensive; they require board members to raise funds from a wider array of sources and involve much more input from constituent groups. In short, they look much more like elections for more professional legislative positions than do similar small-district contests. This raises important questions about the implications of these findings for board structure, practice, and membership in large school districts.

Conclusions

All school boards are not the same. The most striking conclusion from these findings is that large-district boards are fundamentally different from their smaller, more plentiful, cohorts. Although all school boards are buffeted by political currents, large-district boards are more subject to political forces and have a much greater resemblance to other elective bodies than their colleagues in smaller districts.

These differences are reflected as well in large- and small-district boards' concerns about such issues as school violence and their provision of school choice and educational alternatives. To a large extent, public perception of education is shaped by media coverage of large districts, but the differences reported in this study suggest we ought to be cautious about such generalizations.

Some similarities between boards in smaller and larger districts are worth noting, however. Board members nationwide contribute considerable time to school leadership, and few receive any pay for their work. Moreover, no matter what kind of district they serve, today's board members report that student achievement is a pressing concern.

This report is not a forum for advocating any particular reforms in how school boards are chosen, how they are structured, what they do, or the policies they shape. Rather than rendering grand pronouncements, the intention is to ensure that discussion about education governance and policy will proceed with due regard for the varying size, needs, and resources of districts and consideration of the environments in which they operate.

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